

**CONGRESSWOMAN LOUISE M. SLAUGHTER**  
**TESTIMONY ON H.R. 3779**  
**THE SAFEGUARDING SCHOOLCHILDREN OF DEPLOYED SOLDIERS ACT**  
**JUNE 23, 2004**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for this opportunity to testify before the Veterans' Affairs Committee on H.R. 3779, the Safeguarding Schoolchildren of Deployed Soldiers Act. I was pleased to introduce this legislation along with Congresswoman Brown-Waite.

According to Department of Defense estimates, there are currently 200,000 American troops serving in the Middle East, including nearly 55,000 reservists and members of the National Guard. When soldiers are deployed, many arrangements must be made. These men and women leave their jobs, their families, and even their children behind. As the Congressional Representative for the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station, I have seen the enormous disruption and burden deployment places on the families of these men and women. I have also seen the grace with which these families accept the many challenges presented to them.

As an institution, Congress has long recognized the need to minimize the hardships to these soldiers and their families, as demonstrated in the Servicemember's Civil Relief Act, which my bill would amend. It is important for us to recognize that this comprehensive law, first enacted in 1940, never anticipated lengthy deployments by fathers, and certainly not mothers. It never anticipated a time when both parents might be deployed to an overseas theater. And it certainly did not anticipate a time when our nation's divorce rate would reach nearly 50 percent, a fact that creates new challenges for deployed parents. Today, citizen soldiers called up for active duty may have no choice but to send their children to live with the other parent, or another relative who lives one or two towns away.

Obviously, a parent's absence creates many voids in a child's life. Whether it's a missing father who regularly cheered on his little leaguer, or a mother who was always there to help out with algebra homework, the absence of these parents is felt every day in small moments of these young lives. We cannot possibly realize the aggregate impact a parent's absence can have. Having to start at a new school, make new friends, and adjust to new demands, should not be added to the many hardships experienced by these children.

Last summer, I learned firsthand how deployment can cause significant upheaval in a child's life. I was informed that a 10<sup>th</sup> grader in my district was being forced out of her school system when her father left for Iraq and she, naturally, went to live at her mother's home in the next town. At a time of great disruption, this event added considerably to the stresses this young woman and her family were experiencing.

This instance, and others like it, demonstrates the need for legislation requiring that school districts allow these children to remain enrolled, if they wish, even if they reside outside the district while a parent is deployed. I am pleased that a handful of states have already enacted provisions offering this protection. The Safeguarding Schoolchildren of Deployed Soldiers Act would ensure it is offered on a national level.

The Military Officer's Association of America and the National Military Family Association can attest that the Safeguarding Schoolchildren of Deployed Soldiers Act would provide a commonsense solution to this problem by ensuring that more American military children have continuity in their educations.

I strongly urge this committee to approve this legislation. We owe this protection to our children, to their families, and to the peace of mind of our soldiers.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your consideration of this measure.